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Book Review:

Post-Communism and Post-Democracy

Leif Kalev*

Post Democracy by Colin Crouch, 2004, London: Polity Press.

The publication of *Post Democracy* by Colin Crouch in 2004 was symbolic in two ways. First, it synthesised a broad range of ideas through which Western political thought adjusted to post-Cold War changes, usually characterised as globalisation and postmodernisation.

The new theoretical developments by social democrats, the new leftism, the welfare state, the legitimisation crisis, cartel parties and other streams of thought have been packed into a simple, sharp and cohesive message, as confirmed by the fact that 7 editions have already been published over 7 years.

Second, the book was first published in the year of the main eastward enlargement of the European Union. While the key challenges for Western and Eastern Europe largely differed in the 1990s, the next decade witnessed the development of a considerable intersection. This is not only due to Europeanisation (see Ladrech 2010, etc.), but also because of the similarities in the new configuration of politics and governance.

Whether the roots are in postcommunism (e.g. Ágh 1994, 2010) or in the cartelisation of Western politics (e.g. Katz & Mair 2009), the challenges to democracy have become remarkably similar. Post-democracy is a good means of analysing these challenges.

To understand post-democracy, it is perhaps helpful to start with the idea of the parabola of democracy. Crouch sees the development of contemporary democracy as a parabola where a nobility-centred beginning evolves into a universal representative democracy and culminates in the advanced welfare state after the two world wars. However, a downward development towards cartel politics occurs from this peak, beginning in the last quarter of the 20th century.

In addition to representative democracy and the welfare state, the democratic momentum was characterised by strong and self-aware socio-economic movements that were able to influence politics, governments that pursued Keynesian socio-economic policies and were capable of implementing political decisions, and broad citizen participation in politics taken seriously as an arena for making future choices.

The decline was introduced by the oil crisis of the 1970s and the rise of neo-liberal economic thought, which erased the basis of the then-welfare state both practically and morally. Economic globalisation further tied the hands of governments when it came to economic policy. Unable to satisfy the welfare expectations of voters, the elite increasingly utilised advertising and political technologies for electoral success, however, this put citizens in the position of being objects of manipulation and not the democratic foundation of politics.

This decline, however, did not mean a return to the realm of estates. As Crouch notes, the democratic institutions by and large remained in place. In some areas, such as government transparency, citizens' associations, and other new forms of participation, democracy is growing. However, the decline occurs in the citizen-based system of politics and governance of, by and for the people that turns into a post-democratic power jungle, bound together by elites.

Or, as Crouch (2004: 6) himself put it, "My central contentions are that, while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some aspects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of the privileged elites in the manner

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characteristic to predemocratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes“.

Crouch tests his general thesis by examining several areas of social life. The global firm and political party are becoming much less transparent as organisations and increasingly employ unconventional strategies such as withdrawing from practical activities and focusing on marketing their brand or becoming embedded in elite circles to receive information and various benefits. Clear and self-aware socio-economic classes turn into heterogeneity that is more easily manipulated.

Political community and the public sector face the strongest changes. A kind of imaginary reality with a specific sound-bite language of politicians, advertising and political technologies alienate people from mainstream politics, but it nevertheless remains the locus of decision making. An inclusive social citizenship aiming to secure every citizen's capacity of political participation is increasingly replaced by the rationality of public service efficiency and targeted poor aid.

The conceptualisation of the public sector being expert in realising common interests is substituted by the logic of combating inefficiency, optimising and retrenching bureaucracy. Marketisation, complemented by the policy constraints of economic globalisation, generates a growing insecurity in administration and a desire to privatise public services in order to dim responsibility. This in turn leads to the weakening of the government's real powers and to the increasing importance of the clientelistic networking in procurement, monitoring and coordination.

Most of Crouch's ideas are familiar from earlier literature. The gap between the growing expectations of the voters and the realistic policy opportunities of the government that result in a government overload and a legitimisation crisis have been discussed by Habermas (1988) and various public choice authors (see Dryzek & Dunleavy 2009: 100-128 for an overview). The classical authors on cartel parties are Katz and Mair (e.g. 2009), while disenchantment from politics is elegantly analysed by Hay (2007).

The added value of the book is in the integration of these topics into a cohesive, pertinent and intelligible combination. There are many articles and books focusing on the analysis of certain aspects of democracy, while Crouch is taking a more systematic approach. Interpreting the risks of globalisation through citizens' political agency in the system of politics and governance, he creates ground for developing a systematic strategy to meet these challenges.

The text reflects some nostalgia for the industrial society and trade unionism, as brought out by critics. This is probably also the reason behind the cautiousness in discussing the new forms of citizen participation. At the same time, the classical systematic perspective balances the idealism of grassroots democracy and highlights the arenas of key relevance for citizen political agency. Crouch is a controversial, but also an inspirational author.

These topics look familiar also in the post-communist context. Although here it is not possible to speak of the democratic momentum in the middle of 20th century, many aspects Crouch discusses characterise contemporary Central and Eastern European politics. Moreover, some are even more visible, such as political technologies or the domination of elites over citizens. So we can speak of some congruence developing in European politics and governance. This is also the part that can be used in analysing the framework of post-democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, even if the name itself is not a perfect fit.

The positive programme suggested on the basis of criticism includes raising the citizens' ability to comprehend their political role and to practically use their opportunities via issue-based and other citizen associations, combined with ongoing presence in traditional political parties. This is complemented by the constructive monitoring and adequate feedback of politicians' activities. Emphasis should be put on their ability to achieve set aims instead of their personal characteristics and private life. Citizens should also demand more information on the role, competences and responsibilities of the public sector instead of settling for the vagueness created by political technologies. Both politics and governance should be taken more seriously and systematically.

There are two other lines of thought relevant for post-democracy but not directly analysed by Crouch. First, as already mentioned, Colin Hay (2007) examines political participation in a more elaborated framework with clear empirical indicators and relates the disenchantment with politics to the discursive level as well. This provides relevant additional information on how, simultaneously with alienation, the focus of the perception of politics has shifted from statesman's crafts to bargaining and steering the differences. The issue is not only one of taking politics and governance seriously, but also that of spectacles through which they are reviewed.

Second, there have been several important transformations in politics and governance during the last decades. Sørensen (2004) analyses the adjustment of statehood to globalisation and points to new strategies in addition to the classical modern one. While in postmodern states the governments proactively use the new opportunities to expand their influence, many areas of the world are marginalised and become weak states, objects of globalisation. This is related to the analysis of the different styles of governance by Peters and Pierre (2000) and the development of the patterns of governance (see i.a. Kjær 2004) or multi-level governance (see i.a. Bache & Flinders 2004).

The intertwining of multi-level governance with its various levels and actors, ranging from local authorities to EU and UN level arrangements and from public sector to companies and civil society, no doubt goes beyond the traditional framework of modern politics and government. At the same time, this should be seen not only as a series of threats and challenges to cope with but also as the creation of new opportunities to be utilised.

Multi-level governance is not only diminishing transparency and citizen political agency but also creating an opportunity to balance the negative effects of economic globalisation and re-establish the premises for the integrity of politics and governance. Acknowledging the problems of the longer decision-making chains enables us to tackle and overcome them. In the same way, analysing the causes of the weakening of citizen political agency allows us to develop strategies to improve the situation.

The challenges addressed via the notion of post-democracy reflect the major contemporary transition, the adjustment of statehood and society to globalisation in its various aspects from transnationalism or the multiplicity of postmodern identities to multi-level or global governance. This is a vast terrain that requires extensive further research. For that, Crouch has provided us with some useful points.

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